

WHITTIER DAILY NEWS

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Staff photo by LEO JARDINE

DELANCEY STREET residents Don Lawson, left, Richard Ward and Paul Baker, sell Christmas trees on Wednesday.

Program offers convicts 2nd chance

By Manuel Gamiz Jr.
STAFF WRITER

WHITTIER — Don Howard, 37, can only look over to Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility and count his blessings.

"It feels good to be looking from the outside in rather than the inside out," says the Christmas tree salesman originally from Sonoma.

Howard, a former biker, had been in and out of prison since he was 18 years old because of convictions on methamphetamine sales and drug and alcohol abuse. He served stints at San Quentin State Penitentiary, and his most recent exit was from Solano State Prison in 1994.

But his troubled past changed, thanks largely to the Delancey Street Foundation, a self-help residential education center for former substance abusers and ex-convicts, that has opened up two Christmas

tree lots in the Whittier area and one in Montebello.

Howard, who manages the lot on Sorensen Avenue and Whittier Boulevard, is a living example of the foundation's premise of self teaching. He came in three years ago not knowing how to read or write. Now, he can do both and is a supervisor at one of the foundation's warehouses.

"Delancey Street is my family," Howard said.

Paul Baker, formerly of Vallejo and also working at the Sorensen lot, is another shining example of the foundation's help.

The well-spoken ex-con, who's been in and out of jail the past seven years for drug violations, pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, traveling from Northern California and living at the foundation's Los Angeles office for the past five months.

"I just wanted to get away from that element," said Baker, who is seeing Whittier for the very first time. "So far, it feels pretty good to be in a positive environment where I can start

looking at my life."

All that Baker can remember about last year's Christmas was that "it wasn't a very pleasant one," being out of work and down on his luck as he has been the past few years.

So he is excited about his first steady job at the tree lot because he knows the more trees the lot sells, the more people Delancey Street can help.

"It keeps the doors open for somebody who may just be getting out of the pen and is looking for help," said Baker, 38.

About 1,500 residents live in the foundation's five facilities in New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Los Angeles and its headquarters in San Francisco.

The Delancey Street office, 300 N. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles is staffed entirely by ex-convicts, former drug abusers and formerly homeless people. The foundation uses a number of businesses to support the needs of its residents.

New arrivals to Delancey Street make a two-year commitment, even though the doors

aren't locked and participants can choose to leave at any time. Many, like Howard, actually stay three or four years before moving on.

"I wanted to help out the newcomers," said Howard. "Plus I wasn't sure if I was ready or not to leave."

The first goal for many residents is the high-school equivalency certificate, quickly followed by hands-on experience in Delancey Street's training businesses, which include a moving and trucking operation, an advertising-specialty operation involving the sale of college and institutional souvenirs, catering, and Christmas tree sales.

One thing is for sure, Howard says, he is not ready to go back to prison after feeling the Christmas spirit "for the first time ever."

"There is nothing about Christmas in prison."

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